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The Washington Merry-Go-Round

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Thai Opium Bonfire Mostly Fodder

By Jack Anderson

With enormous fanfare last March, the Thai government announced it had burned 26 tons of opium. The pyre was hailed in Washington and Bangkok as evidence that Thailand at last was getting serious about cutting off the flow of heroin to the U.S.

"This quantity of opium if refined into heroin," crowed the State Department to Congress, "could have supplied one-half the U.S. market for one year." The value of the opium fed to the bonfire was estimated in the hundreds of millions.

Now, the CIA and other federal agencies have quietly informed Washington that something besides opium went up in that bonfire. The real story is that Thailand and, indirectly the U.S., were hornswoggled into believing that 26 tons of opium were burned, when, in fact, most of it was cheap fodder.

The tale of duplicity begins in November, 1971, when the drug-smuggling remnants of Nationalist Chinese troops along the Thai-Burma-Laos border heard the Thai govern-

ment wanted to buy up some opium for a public demonstration.

The aging Nationalist generals weren't born yesterday. Having lived by their wits for 20 years, they saw an opportunity to make a killing.

Instead of loading raw opium, they pushed 100 mules with fodder, other plant matter, chemicals, and about 20 per cent opium.

The caravans made their way down from the remote border areas of Kachin and Shan to the northern drug center of Chiang Mai where the burning was to take place.

As one mule after another was unburdened, the Thais paid off the Chinese—in part, probably, with U.S. aid funds. In all, the cagy dope peddlers passed off five tons of opium as 26 tons and pocketed more than \$2 million from the fantastic hoax.

Either through corruption or stupidity, the Thai officials failed to test the huge mounds of "opium" before they soaked it with gasoline and put it to the torch.

Only as the smell of burning molasses wafted through Chiang Mai did the Thais suspect they had been had. Then,

it was too late to do anything but cover up their goof.

And cover up they did. They hastily recruited gangs of workers to bury the "hundreds of millions of dollars" worth of fodder and opium ashes.

Lives Lost

Two years ago, we reported that thousands of American lives could have been saved in Vietnam if the Army had developed adequate head and body armor.

The brass hats began a furious search for an answer to our charges but found the position, in the words of one general, "too weak to merit a rebuttal."

Disturbed over our disclosures, Sen. Charles Mc. Mathias (R-Md.), requested a General Accounting Office investigation. The GAO report, not yet released to the public, backs us up completely.

Citing a "preliminary analysis" of 2,703 Army and 627 Marine casualties, the report declares that "the Army's nylon vest did not significantly reduce casualties or deaths" and that "the helmet, used by both the Army and Marine Corps, gives marginal reduction of death from fragments but ap-

parently no reduction in casualties."

Not only did the armor provide insufficient protection, we reported originally, but many lives had been lost because the GIs hadn't been trained to wear their battle gear.

Military authorities, in response, steadfastly insisted the helmet and vest were regularly worn. But the GAO, basing its conclusion on the Army's own research, said:

"If the Army vest was worn, about a 40 per cent decrease in wounds in protected areas could be anticipated against all fragmentation weapons and about a 55 per cent decrease against the M-26 hand grenade...."

"Under identical heat, humidity, wind and cloud-cover conditions, the Marine Corps use of vests averaged 73.7 per cent while Army usage averaged only 16.1 per cent.

"We believe the Army's low use of the vest in Vietnam relates to a lack of training and emphasis on using it during combat. In contrast, the Marine Corps does use the vest in training and puts emphasis on its use during combat."

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